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1–10–50: When God Runs

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I am always amazed by the power of stories.

We value most highly those teachers and professors who did not only know their subject, but were able to communicate effectively. In my case I remember those who were great storytellers. I may have forgotten most of the dates, formulas, or theories, but their stories linger on.

Jesus knew about the power of stories, often using parables to make a point. After all, He was not really interested in innovative sowing techniques or the best methods of crop care. Jesus wanted to communicate spiritual truths that often contained mind-boggling and surprising concepts, so He talked in spoken images. As Ellen White put it: “The unknown was illustrated by the known; divine truths by earthly things with which the people were most familiar.”*

Context

Three of the best-known parables of Jesus are found in Luke 15. In Luke 14:25-35 we find Jesus surrounded by large crowds. The Master talks about the cost of discipleship using different images. Family, even parents, have to take second place (verses 26, 27); a builder has to make a long-term financial plan (verse 28); a king should weigh the costs of waging war (verses 31-33); salt has to remain salty (verses 34, 35). At the end of this string of images Jesus cries out: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (verse 35).

The next scene is significant: Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners (!) were pressing around Jesus to *hear* Him. They had understood the invita-

tion, while the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered disapprovingly (Luke 15:1, 2).

Knowing all this, Jesus tells a story—actually three stories, all dealing with the same topic. They all follow a similar pattern: somebody loses something, searches desperately, finds it, and celebrates—end of story.

Of Sheep, Coins, and Prodigals

First, there is the shepherd who, noticing that one sheep has wandered away during the heat of the day, leaves the remaining 99 sheep to look for the lost. Have you ever wondered about the viability of the shepherd’s decision to seemingly ignore the 99 and focus on the one that was lost? Friends with business sense tell me that losing only 1 percent in production actually represents a great batting average. Why

would the shepherd leave the 99 to find the one missing? Jesus’ explanation in verse 7 provides a hint: Heaven rejoices over every single sinner who repents, while the other 99 might not feel the need to turn around. Can you imagine the look on the faces of the Pharisees at that moment?

The lost coin story makes a different point. This time Jesus raises the loss factor to 10 percent. Counting her silver coin treasure—most likely part of her dowry—a woman discovers that one coin is missing. This was for a rainy day—the equivalent of 10 wages of a day laborer. The woman still had 90 percent, but begins to search frantically. In full daylight she lights a lamp in order to see into every nook and cranny of her home. When she finally finds the coin, she calls friends and neighbors to share the good news (verse 9). The woman

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When God runs

By GERALD A. KLINGBEIL

invests heavily (remember, with no electricity lamp oil was costly!) in order to reclaim her treasure; then she shares her joy with her community. Again Jesus reminds His audience that a sinner who repents causes joy in heavenly courts.

The last story is even more surprising. This time the audience must have gasped when they understood that a younger son of two (not the firstborn) went to his father to *demand* his inheritance. That was something that just was not done. It showed lack of respect and was shameful. You know the cadence of the story. The young man escapes from home, lives fast and furious, and finally finds himself broke and humiliated, looking after swine and yearning for their menu. At his wits' end he decides to return home—not as a son, but as a servant.

Meanwhile, the father had been on the lookout every day. One day he sees a run-down figure slowly making his way toward the house. The figure looks vaguely familiar—yes, *it is his son*. The next scene blows away everything. The father starts running toward his smelly, stinking son. The father's embrace seems to last for eternity—finally the lost has come home. A party is quickly organized, and the entire household celebrates—that is, nearly the entire household. The older brother, bitter and forlorn, is not ready to join the feast. Jesus dedicates eight verses to tell us about the dialogue between the father and his older son. Verses 31 and 32 provide the highlight: “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your

brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”

Salvation Paradox

Many lessons can be learned from these three stories. All three remind us graphically that salvation requires outside help. Whether it's a shepherd, a woman frantically searching for a coin, or a father waiting for his son: when we are lost, it is God who takes the initiative to save us (John 6:44). Once we recognize our helpless state we have to make the decision to “come home” and allow God's Spirit to transform us into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). In God's math, 1 percent + 10 percent + 50 percent = 1—the one who is lost. God's saving grace looks beyond numbers and probabilities for individuals. The entire universe is observing the great struggle for humanity's destiny. Every found person causes another roar of celebration in the heavenly courts. Every decision against Christ causes tears and pain in the celestial family.

As Jesus looked around the crowd listening to these key stories of the kingdom, He looked for those who would *hear*—and *embrace* God's saving and transforming grace. He is still looking today. ■

* Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), p. 17.



Gerald A. Klingbeil is an associate editor of *Adventist World* who loves running into the arms of Jesus.

The Experience of Salvation

In infinite love and mercy God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might be made the righteousness of God. Led by the Holy Spirit we sense our need, acknowledge our sinfulness, repent of our transgressions, and exercise faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ, as Substitute and Example. This faith which receives salvation comes through the divine power of the Word and is the gift of God's grace. Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God's sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin. Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God's law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life. Abiding in Him we become partakers of the divine nature and have the assurance of salvation now and in the judgment. (2 Cor. 5:17-21; John 3:16; Gal. 1:4; 4:4-7; Titus 3:3-7; John 16:8; Gal. 3:13, 14; 1 Peter 2:21, 22; Rom. 10:17; Luke 17:5; Mark 9:23, 24; Eph. 2:5-10; Rom. 3:21-26; Col. 1:13, 14; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:26; John 3:3-8; 1 Peter 1:23; Rom. 12:2; Heb. 8:7-12; Eze. 36:25-27; 2 Peter 1:3, 4; Rom. 8:1-4; 5:6-10.)